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Conducting Longitudinal Research with Older Widows: Exploring Personal Communities through Multiple Methods

(Shortened version of the title: Conducting longitudinal research with older widows)

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Abstract

This article reports on the process of undertaking a longitudinal multiple methods study with older women experiencing the transition of later life widowhood. A series of three qualitative in depth interviews were conducted with twenty-six older widows in North Staffordshire, United Kingdom. Interviews included the use of personal community diagrams to identify the structure of personal communities, and Christmas and Christmas cards to further explore social relationships and practices during transition. Examples of cases are given to illustrate the findings derived from the methods employed. The cases demonstrate the diverse and often paradoxical nature of social relationships within similar networks.

Keywords

Research design; older women; widowhood; social support

Introduction and literature review

Studies have shown high levels of social support and participation to be linked to improved health status, lower mortality rates, and a mediation of the effects of life transitions (Reich & Zautra, 1989; Bowling, 1994; Momtaz, Hamid, Yahaya & Ibrahim, 2009). However, this area continues to be under-researched in regard to specific groups and in particular contexts (Author, 2014). This study explores the transition of later life widowhood as experienced by a group of older women. This cohort is of interest as there are larger numbers of older widows than older widowers (Hirst & Corden, 2010) and they are often perceived as at risk, as discussed by Chambers (2005). Indeed traditionally much of the literature concerning widowhood and social relationships portrays older widows as the passive beneficiaries of support (Morgan, 1989). However, for many older women the period following bereavement can also be a time of independence, growth and activity (Lieberman, 1996; Hurd, 1999; Davidson, 2001a; 2001b; 2002; Chambers, 2005; Author 2013). Previous studies have generally approached the transition of widowhood retrospectively rather than being alongside older widows as they experience change (Author, 2011). This study through prolonged engagement explores change as it is happening and as events unfold.

Although the social support network types of older people in Britain have been identified by Wenger (1990, 1991, 1997), the network types of older widows have not been examined specifically and not over time particularly. The scarce literature that does pertain to social support network type and widowhood appears to be contradictory (Author, 2011). Previous studies have associated widowhood in later life with a dependency on local family (Wenger, 1991, 1997) and with restricted networks (Litwin, 2000, 2001). However, more recently Fiori, Antonucci, and Akiyama (2008) found a 'friend-focused' network type to be associated with the older widows in their sample of older people suggesting a widening of the support networks of these women during widowhood.

Rather than focusing on relationships in terms of social support received, this study is more interested in older widows' active engagement with their social ties in a wider more fluid sense. To this end, the concept of personal communities seemed to be a more appropriate lens. Personal communities have been described as social relationships that provide structure, meaning, and

everyday social capital (Wellman, 1990; Wellman et al., 1997), and more recently as reflecting the diversity of contemporary ties with family, friends and the wider community (Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Chambers, Allan, Phillipson & Ray, 2009). Therefore this study explores the personal communities of older widows during transition rather than their social support networks per se.

To explore the nature and complexity of the older widows' personal communities during transition as well as the structure, this research adopts a multi-method approach and a longitudinal design within a qualitative framework of subtle realism (Mays & Pope, 2000). This theoretical stance allows for the exploration of the older women's individual experiences of the transition of widowhood as well as for the examination of their personal communities during the change process. In addition, it encompasses the use of multiple methods allowing for a triangulation of data and a 'thick' description of the phenomena under study (Creswell, 2003). To this end, personal community diagrams (based on those of Antonucci, 1986 and others) identify the structure of the women's personal communities allowing for the development of a typology, while interviews explore the content or expressive characteristics of these relationships which can often be complex (Stevens, 1989; Dykstra & De Jong Gierveld, 1994; Luscher & Pillemer, 1998; Perlman & Vangelisti, 2006; Scott et al., 2007).

Moreover, as this study involves the ongoing participation of older widows over a period of time, it allows for the exploration of their social convoys: the network of social relationships, which move with them throughout their life course (Khan, Antonucci, Baltes & Brim, 1980). Because of the unfolding nature of the study and the iterative process involved, it became apparent during the initial fieldwork that Christmas is both an emotional and a telling time in the change process. Indeed Christmas can be viewed as a microcosm of individual personal communities, revealing the qualitative dimensions of the women's social ties and practices during transition (Bocock, 1974; Allan & Crow, 1989; Coppet, 1992; Allan, 1996; Morgan, 1996; Chambers et al., 2009). Therefore following baseline interviews, subsequent interviews focussed on the women's experiences of Christmas and the exchange of Christmas cards, that is who they received cards from and who they sent cards to. The older women who took part in this study were all White British and celebrated the

Christian tradition. Older widows with other cultural and religious backgrounds, such as Hindus, Jews and Muslims, might find other celebrations to be more meaningful.

The aim of this study is to gain an understanding of the personal communities of a group of older women as they experience the transition of later life widowhood. This article reports on the process of conducting longitudinal multiple methods research with older widows, including the strengths and limitations.

Methods

A qualitative methodology involving in-depth interviews was deemed to be appropriate for this study. Rather than simply measuring a phenomenon qualitative research aims to understand it from the perspective of the individual who is experiencing it (Green & Thorogood, 2004) revealing subjective meanings (Guba, 1990; Silverman, 2006). Recent qualitative studies of later life widowhood conducted in Britain, such as Chambers (2005) and Davidson (2002), have largely employed a retrospective rather than a longitudinal approach (Carr & Utz, 2002). Although Bennett's (1998, 2005) studies were longitudinal, they were concerned with the psychological, rather than the sociological, aspects of the transition. This study employs a longitudinal design as it is concerned with the transition of widowhood and what happens after a period of bereavement. This differs from much of the existing widowhood literature, which is largely concerned with the transition to widowhood (Carr & Utz, 2002), and social support and adaptation in the initial stages (Bankoff, 1983; Littlewood, 1992; Prigerson, Frank, Reynolds, George & Kupfer, 1993). This longitudinal approach captures unfolding events over time (Bryman, 2001; Vaus, 2001) and provides an insight into the process of transition as it is happening rather than a retrospective snap shot (Wenger, 1991; Ray, 2000a; Charania & Ickes, 2006).

Since this study is concerned with both the structure and the content of the older widows' personal communities it incorporates the use of multiple methods of enquiry (Creswell, 2003; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). This study uses personal community diagrams to identify the structure of the women's personal communities, allowing for the development of a typology (VanLear, Koerner & Allen, 2006). The personal community diagrams used in this study, refer to Figure 1 and Figure 2, are

based on those used in previous studies (Antonucci, 1986; Wellman, 1990; Phillipson, Bernard, Phillips & Ogg, 2001; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). The hierarchical mapping technique using diagrams consisting of three concentric circles offers an uncomplicated, useful means of identifying significant social relationships (Allan, 2006, 2008; Spencer & Pahl, 2006) and examining social relations over time (Fiori et al., 2008). This technique involves individuals being asked to name people that are very close and important to them in the inner circle, and those that are less close but still important to them in the middle and outer circles of their diagrams. Using this method enables the older widows, rather than the researcher, to establish the significance of their social relationships (Van der Poel, 1993). Although the diagrams have their benefits they also have their limitations. People might construct them in accordance with normative expectations (Finch, 1989; Jerrome, 1993; Spencer & Pahl, 2006), in addition, they are thought to concentrate on the structure rather than the content of personal communities (Khan et al., 1980; Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Fiori et al., 2008). The other methods of data collection used in this study partially compensate for this (Creswell, 2003).

The older widows' experiences and subjective meanings of their personal communities during transition are explored through a series of in-depth interviews (Hockey & James, 2003; Chambers, 2005; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviews conducted in this study follow a semi-structured format (Patton, 2002), interview schedules were designed and worded to establish rapport and address the research questions (Silverman, 2006). For example, questions asked during the first part of the initial interview included: Can you tell me a little about yourself? How has your life changed since being widowed? The rationale for including these questions was to generate contextual information as a backdrop for the women's experiences of transition. Questions asked later on in the initial interview included: Can you tell me about the people that are important to you, such as family, friends and neighbours? Are you closer to some more than others? The rationale for including these questions was to further explore the qualitative characteristics of the women's social relationships. In addition, the second and third interviews used Christmas and Christmas cards as discursive tools to reveal individual experiences and social relations in a more fluid sense (Plummer, 2001). Moreover the discussion of Christmas and Christmas cards allows for the further exploration of the older widows'

family practices (Morgan, 1996; Chambers et al., 2009) and social convoys (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Allan, 2006) during transition.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained prior to the commencement of fieldwork and the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice (2002) was adopted to guide the research process. Informed consent was gained with all of the women ensuring voluntary participation in the study (Vaus, 2001). The women were assured anonymity and pseudonyms were used to protect their identity and confidentiality. Interview transcripts were anonymised and audiotapes destroyed once data analysis was complete to further protect the confidentiality and privacy of the participants (Israel & Hay, 2006).

Participants included an opportunistic purposive sample of twenty-six older widows (62-90 years of age) living in North Staffordshire, United Kingdom. This age range incorporated both the 'young-old' and 'old-old' (Litwin and Laundau, 2000). A purposive sample consists of 'information rich cases' selected for in-depth study (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009:173). Older women who had been widowed between one and three years were invited to take part in this study as they were experiencing the transitional phase of widowhood, as identified by Bankoff (1983). The type of purposive sampling used in this study was opportunistic as the older widows were accessed on a voluntary basis via a newspaper article, organisations for older people, and through family and friends. Although using a combination of strategies, including the use of gatekeepers, snowballing and advertising, can lead to a more diverse sample (Sixsmith, Boneham & Goldring, 2003), all the women who volunteered to take part in the study were White British.

Semi-structured interviews took place in each woman's home and lasted between forty five minutes and one and a half hours. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. I chose to undertake my own transcription because this can be seen as the beginning of interpretive analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) moreover transcriptions were verbatim to improve 'literal accuracy' (Miller, 2000:84). In addition, field notes and a reflective diary were kept throughout the course of the study to provide further context to the interviews, the nonverbal communication of the participants, as well as my own thoughts and feelings (Chambers, 2005; Finlay & Ballinger, 2006). The diary and

field notes were drawn on and contributed to the ethical considerations of this study as well as the analysis of the women's personal community diagrams and interview transcripts.

Pilot interviews were conducted with four older widowed women, who did not take part in the main study, to ensure that the personal community diagram and initial interview schedule acted as appropriate data collection tools, this can be seen to increase reliability (Finlay and Ballinger, 2006). These four women contacted me after I had recruited a sufficient number of participants to the main study but were happy to take part in the pilot study. Both the personal community diagram and interview schedule appeared to work well as discursive instruments therefore no modifications were made prior to the main study.

The purpose of the initial interviews, conducted in the summer of 2004, was to establish a baseline, explore the women's life histories and the impact of widowhood using the piloted interview schedule, and their personal communities utilising the piloted personal community diagram. The women were asked to 'name people that are very close and important to you' in the inner circle and 'name people that are less close but still important to you' in the middle and outer circles of their diagrams. Initial entries to personal community diagrams were annotated in black ink.

A second set of interviews took place with twenty-five of the women in the winter of 2005. The focus of the second interviews was the shared social event of Christmas, the women were also asked to save their Christmas cards and talk the researcher through them. The ongoing experiences of the women were also discussed, and their personal community diagrams revisited – the women were asked to comment on any changes within their network and to add members if they wished. Second stage entries were annotated in red ink to distinguish them from the initial entries. At this stage, using a recursive and iterative approach (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009), I conducted a preliminary analysis of a subset of the first and second interviews and referred back to my initial aim and research questions as well as the existing literature prior to further data collection. Originally I had planned to conduct a series of three interviews at six monthly intervals. However, after conducting the second interviews it became apparent that Christmas was a particularly significant and

telling time in the change process. Therefore rather than returning to interview the women after six months during the summer of 2005 I decided to wait and re-interview them after twelve months.

A third and final set of interviews took place with twenty-one of the women in the winter of 2006. These interviews focused on the changing experiences and social worlds of the women over a longer period of widowhood, the shared social event of Christmas and Christmas cards for a second year, and other significant events such as birthdays and anniversaries celebrated over the year.

Personal community diagrams were revisited for a final time and the women were given the opportunity to consider them and make any changes. Third stage entries were annotated in green ink to distinguish them from the initial and second stage entries.

The personal community diagrams were analysed for their content based on the composition and centrality of the women's ties (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). The analytic process revealed four core types of personal community which are salient throughout this study, refer to Table 1. This study's findings are consistent with those of previous findings from personal community diagrams, in identifying network typologies broadly consisting of family and friends (Fiori et al., 2008), suggesting generaliseability. As the personal community diagrams were used at three points over the study it was possible to chart any changes as they happened. Although some of the women's personal communities in terms of size remained relatively stable over the course of the three interviews, others grew quite significantly. Shifts took place in all of the personal community types except the 'concentrated family' type, suggesting that this is the most stable as well as the most common. Examples of the older widows' personal community diagrams constructed and revised over three stages can be seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

The interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis in order to identify patterns and contrasts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The NVIVO qualitative data analysis software was also used to assist in the analysis of the interview data (Bazeley, 2007), as the three stages of interviews generated a large amount of detailed material. In addition to coding and retrieving the data the software also supports the development of theoretical concepts (Gibbs, 2002). These findings are presented and

discussed fully in previous articles (Author, 2013, 2014). The themes ‘a different kind of Christmas’ and ‘family friction’ are presented as part of the case examples given in this article.

Findings

Two case examples, Marilyn and Mary (pseudonyms), are included here to illustrate the findings derived from the longitudinal multiple methods employed in this study. These cases are included as they illustrate heterogeneity in the experience of later life widowhood despite the women having similar personal community types. Marilyn (aged 73) had been widowed three years at the time of the first interview. At the first stage of interviews Marilyn had a ‘family only’ type of personal community. During the second and third interviews she added friends and others shifting her type from ‘family only’ to ‘concentrated family’. Figure 1 illustrates Marilyn’s personal community diagram over the three stages. During the second interview Marilyn added two friends to the outer circle of her diagram, one is Hilary a widow who lives nearby, and one is Amy who had been to visit since the initial interview six months earlier and who had recently sent a Christmas card:

‘This (card) is from my friend, I’ve got a photograph up there with her cat, I took the photograph when I was at her house. Amy, she’s got a car and she comes and we have something to eat and then she usually takes me to her house and we have a coffee and see the cats.’

Twelve months on during the third interview Marilyn talked about spending more time with her friend Hilary and a new companion: I’ve got a friend who lives next door but one and we go on holidays together. We go on coaches and we go to Bournemouth and Scotland, we did last year, and we are booked to go this year as well...and I’ve got a friend, a man friend.

Marilyn added two more friends to the outer circle of her diagram during the third interview:

‘Hilary’s sister, Maureen. I’ll put Mo and I don’t think I’ve got any more friends...er I’ve got Amy, Hilary, Mo, er and Jessica, I knew her from a long time ago...but recently we’ve met up again, you know.’

During the third interview Marilyn reflected on the changes that had occurred since the initial interview eighteen months ago: 'The first time you came I was a bit dull and down and that...you know, but with going out, it's brought me out, you know, myself'. Marilyn's increase in social ties outside of the family over the eighteen-month period demonstrates the dynamic nature of personal communities in a relatively short space of time.

The theme 'a different kind of Christmas' emerged for a number of the older widows in this study. Several of the women, particularly those who had been widowed for a longer period of time, demonstrated discontinuity by deciding to spend Christmas differently away from their families and homes. For example, Marilyn's Christmas during the early days of widowhood appeared to be a novel and separate event in contrast to the routine of the rest of the year. As she described during the second interview:

'Well Christmas Day I went to my son's for a Christmas meal, you know, all of us, stayed there Christmas Day. Then New Year's Eve we went to a friend's and left there at about one, two o'clock in the morning, because you've got to see the New Year in haven't you? And er then it is back to normal, boring things.'

As Marilyn has two adult children she explained how Christmas Day is celebrated between the two families: 'Like this year we're going to Gill's all day on Christmas Day, so they take it in turns'. However, during the third interview, Marilyn talked about spending a different Christmas, from the usual celebrations with her adult son and daughter, away with her widowed friend:

'I went with me friend and her sister and her husband, and two more friends of hers, and we had a great time...great time. The hotel was lovely and they had three different er turns on every night, and the food was excellent, and it was really, really nice, and we were walking along the sea front...because the weather was nice, and then Boxing Day they had all er carol singers outside in the main town and we went to see them, and we really enjoyed it...Her husband died on the 28th of December...you know, so it was Christmas time when he died, so she was glad really to be away from home.'

As well as celebrating an alternative Christmas, Marilyn's deepening friendship has led to a general increase in her social interaction throughout the rest of the year, as she reflected:

'I didn't go out a lot, but now I've met Hilary you see, she's the same temperament as me, and then she's got friends and I'm making friends with her friends, and it's quite...interesting and nice. Something to look forward to instead of, you know winter months miserable and you're sitting here looking at four walls.'

These widening friendships are reflected in Marilyn's Christmas cards, as she discussed new friends that she had met on a recent trip: "This is from friends who we went out with yesterday, and we went to Christmas, you know at Blackpool...and this is from a friend of Hilary and mine when we went to Blackpool." In contrast to her restricted social life during the early days of widowhood, which might be due in part to her having been the main carer for her husband for several years, Marilyn has developed a newfound confidence along with her wider ties and activities, relying less on her adult children. This reflects the shift from her initial 'family only' personal community type to her 'concentrated family' personal community type: "I think I've, I'm used to being on my own now, I do more things, I can do more things myself, than asking people to do for me. I'm more independent."

After some consideration Marilyn concluded that the significant shift of spending

Christmas away with her widowed friend instead of between her adult son and daughter was the right decision for her, as she reflected during the third interview: 'I've never been away before at

Christmas, and we were both thinking 'Oh are we doing the right thing?' But we did, yes'. Marilyn's growing autonomy and confidence is evident in the independent choices she is making as an older widow and her shift in personal community type. Marilyn's accounts throughout the three interviews are consistent with the changes in her personal community diagram.

The analytic process also revealed a discrepancy between some of the older widows' personal community diagrams and personal narratives from their interview transcripts and accounts of Christmas, suggesting that these women might have constructed their diagrams in accordance with normative expectations. Mary (aged 81) had been widowed almost two years at the time of the first

interview. As can be seen from figure 2, Mary's 'concentrated family' personal community type remains relatively stable throughout the three stages. During the second interview Mary added her sister-in-law and friend Sylvia to the middle circle of her diagram after discussing her Christmas cards:

'This is off Sylvia, who lost her husband, it's two years this year, George's (deceased husband's) brother, our best man at our wedding he was, she's my best friend, she comes...haven't I got her on there (personal community diagram), Sylvia?'

Although Mary includes the majority of her family, including her four adult children, in the centre of her diagram from the outset, the structural 'closeness' of these ties are not reflected in Mary's lived experience of these social relationships. The theme 'family friction' emerged for some of the older widows in this study. For Mary, who like Marilyn has a 'concentrated family' personal community type, friction between her four adult children, compounded by her being housebound, culminated in her exemption from family celebrations and spending Christmas at home alone. She talked about this during the third interview:

'I wasn't asked to go anywhere...me daughter...I've not been in her house since she's been there...I've never been in her house...and I don't go to any of them love, any of the houses, all four of them. I don't go to none of them, no.'

Rather than being a positive experience and a time to re-affirm ties with close members of her personal community, for Mary Christmas simply serves to reinforce feelings of loneliness and isolation in later life widowhood. When perceived normative expectations, such as spending Christmas with family or exchanging gifts and cards, are not fulfilled because of issues such as family friction and relationship strain, a form of rationalisation appears to take place. This is illustrated by Mary as she talked further about her separation from her family particularly over the Christmas period:

'The problem is they're all working they've all got their jobs, and so it makes it very awkward then doesn't it? You know what I mean...Cheryl's (daughter's) got such an important job up

at the hospital, she goes in the morning at eight o'clock, and she doesn't get home some nights until nine o'clock at night. They're all tied up you see with their work, Paul's (son's) on shifts, you know, three different shifts. Of course Sarah (daughter) walks with a stick herself.'

Mary's limited interaction with her adult children is incongruent with her personal community diagram, which situates them in the centre of her social world, rationalisation then attempts to ease this incongruence. Although Mary and Marilyn have the same 'concentrated family' type of personal community, their different experiences of Christmas demonstrate complexity and diversity in their social relationships.

Reflections on the research design

Employing a longitudinal design has enabled me to be alongside the women as events in their lives unfolded, I feel privileged that the women were so willing to share intimate details of their daily lives with me over an extended period of time. This 'insider knowledge', revealed the positive and negative aspects of continuity and discontinuity during transition (Author, 2013). Much of the earlier widowhood literature focuses on discontinuity as a negative aspect of change. In addition to interviewing the women, I have been invited for meals, shown family photographs, and been given Christmas presents and cards, Ray (2000b: 16) refers to this as 'being privy' to 'daily intimacies'. At the beginning of the study I felt guarded in talking about 'myself' as a researcher, as time went on though I began to invest my personal identity into the relationship I was developing with the women, and talked freely about my own personal circumstances when asked. As noted by Oakley (2005:226) there can be 'no intimacy without reciprocity' when conducting longitudinal in-depth interviews. In December 2008 when I sent out Christmas cards with an update and informing the women that I was expecting my first child in March 2009, I received an increase in responses and good will messages reflecting the importance given to family and intergenerational ties by the older widows.

Problematic ethical and methodological issues involved in the longitudinal study of widowhood in later life include the sensitivity of bereavement, that changes observed in relation to

transition might occur because of the process of ageing, and attrition (Vaus, 2001). One of the women died in between the first and second interviews, and four of the women were unable to complete the third interview because of ill health or for personal circumstances, for example, one of the older widows had recently lost her son. It was decided not to return the transcripts to the women because of the sensitive nature of the material, involving bereavement and family relationships, which might have caused emotional distress to the women, and also to their families in the event of their death. Member checking is thought to increase the internal validity and credibility of research (Finlay, 2006), however this was overshadowed by the need to observe the ethical principle of non maleficence, to do no harm (Gilhooly, 2002).

I have experienced a constant tension conducting a longitudinal study between being 'ready' to go back into the field, and keeping the women engaged in the study over long periods of not interviewing them. I was anxious that the women would lose interest in the study and withdraw (Vaus, 2001; Charania & Ickes, 2006). I employed strategies to try and combat this, sending the women regular updates on the research process and keeping in touch with Christmas cards. Some of the women responded with letters and phone calls about their news, as well as through Christmas cards. Indeed Tinker (1998) points to the length of time given by busy participants to longitudinal studies and suggests that feedback is essential if people are to believe their time has been well spent. Similarly Sixsmith et al. (2003:587) stress 'the importance of maintaining access, trust, and credibility' by sharing knowledge with participants throughout the research process.

Discussion and conclusions

Because this study utilised personal community diagrams and interviews at more than one point over a period of time it was possible to identify shifts in personal community type, as well as changes in personal relationships and practices. This longitudinal research adds to the retrospective studies of later life widowhood recently conducted in Britain (Chambers, 2005; Davidson, 2002, for example). However, as the older widows had the opportunity to revisit their personal community diagrams many of them added existing social ties that were omitted during the earlier interviews, as we saw with Mary. Shifts then can be seen as substantive, that is an actual widening of social relationships during

transition, but also as a result of the methods employed; this highlights a weakness of the diagrams if only used at one point in time. As discussed earlier the longitudinal design and additional methods of data collection used in this study compensate in part for this (Creswell, 2003; Finlay and Ballinger, 2006).

The findings of this study illustrate that the data derived from the personal community diagrams, although useful to identify personal community types, only provide a surface understanding of the women's personal communities. However, the themes that emerge from the women's discussion of their Christmas celebrations and their Christmas cards elaborate on and extend the structural components of their personal communities, adding to the credibility of the findings (Cresswell, 2003). The women's telling experiences of Christmas expose the deeper meanings of social relationships during transition and confirm that social practices are an important means of studying family relationships and uncovering wider social relations (Bocock, 1974; Allan & Crow, 1989; Coppet, 1992; Allan, 1996; Morgan, 1996; Chambers et al., 2009).

There are four core types of personal community which are salient throughout this study, as seen in Table 1. The typology of personal communities (of older widows) identified in this study adds to the existing typology (of adults) identified by Spencer & Pahl (2006) in Britain. However, as there were six types at the beginning, this suggests that some sets of relationships pass through different types over time rather than remaining static (VanLear et al., 2006). The majority of the women in this study have 'family-type' personal communities, particularly the 'concentrated family' type. This supports the findings of Wenger (1990) who found 'family dependent networks' to remain stable over time. The findings are also consistent with those of other longitudinal studies that have found family relationships to be more continuous over time than relationships with friends and neighbours (Wellman et al., 1997). The shifts in personal community type in this study are largely positive and indicate a broadening of the social ties of the older women during the transition of widowhood, as reflected and substantiated in their changing experiences of Christmas. These findings further demonstrate the process of change in personal relationships over time (Allan, 2006). Marilyn demonstrated a widening of her ties and a decreased reliance on her adult children when her personal

community type shifted from the restricted 'family only' to the more robust 'concentrated family' type. This change in structure was reflected in Marilyn's change in Christmas celebrations, spent with her new friends rather than her family. This corresponds with earlier research which suggests that friends, and new friends associated with larger heterogeneous networks, appear to become more important over the course of widowhood (Bankoff, 1983).

For the majority of the women in this study the content of their personal communities largely reflects their structure. However, for a minority of the older widows there is dissonance between their relationships with their kin and the placement of these personal community members in their diagrams, as illustrated by Mary. Indeed, the findings of this study concur with those of earlier studies, which suggest that loneliness might be exacerbated in widowhood when there is incongruence between expected support and tangible support (Stevens, 1989; Dykstra & De Jong Gierveld, 1994). The findings might also indicate the heterogeneity and complexity in levels of satisfaction with social support during widowhood, found by Scott et al. (2007). Furthermore, this dissonance was often justified by the older widows through a rationalisation of the behaviour of their significant others. The apparent contradictions found in this study might arise from these older widows wanting to portray a positive image of their social relationships, particularly those with adult children, despite there being a discrepancy between their expected and actual behaviour. This concurs with the previous findings of Finch (1989) and more recently Spencer & Pahl (2006).

The playing down of problematic relationships demonstrated by some of the older widows also supports previous research, which suggests that parents tend to overestimate family cohesion and understate family friction to maintain an ideal norm of their family relationships (Finch, 1989; Jerrome, 1993). Indeed the seemingly irreconcilable contradictions in relationships between some of the older widows and their adult children found in this study point to the 'intergenerational ambivalence' identified by Luscher & Pillemer (1998:416). Although many of the older widows' personal communities demonstrate an increasing emphasis on friendships and flexibility, the normative construction of some of the women's diagrams points to the salience of the distinct boundaries placed between family and friends (Allan, 2006, 2008). This demonstrates that even when

relationships with family members are problematic they can still be significant (Perlman & Vangelisti, 2006).

Although the 'concentrated family' personal community type is the most robust and prevalent among the older widows in this study, in terms of structure, the women's unique experiences of Christmas reveal individual differences in the content of these relationships, as demonstrated by Marilyn and Mary. Furthermore, these differences may be due in part to the women's age and health status, aged eighty-one Mary is considered to be 'old-old' whereas Marilyn aged seventy-three is considered to be 'young-old' (Litwin and Landau, 2000). Previous studies have noted the predictive usefulness of network types, particularly in terms of identifying social support (Wenger, 1997; Litwin & Landau, 2000). Although these are interesting findings, this research highlights the diverse, complex and often paradoxical nature of social relationships within similar networks, which might impact on the provision of family support in later life.

The longitudinal multiple methods of enquiry employed in this study reveal the complex process of transition during later life widowhood, including diverse experiences and subjective meanings of personal communities (Guba, 1990; Silverman, 2006). In addition the findings of this study are consistent with those of previous studies in identifying network typologies broadly consisting of family and friends (Fiori et al., 2008). However the limitations of the research are that the typology of personal communities identified is only applicable to the sample of (White British) women who took part in this study and therefore generalisations are limited (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). It could also be argued that this study's focus on the 'novel' experience of Christmas may not be a typical illustration of the older widows' personal communities during the rest of the year. Future work incorporating different groups in different contexts is therefore recommended in order to expand and develop the findings of this research. This could include a longitudinal study exploring the personal communities of older widows and widowers belonging to different ethnic groups, incorporating significant social celebrations other than Christmas.

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Figure 1 Marilyn’s personal community diagram over the three stages

1st stage

2nd stage

3rd stage

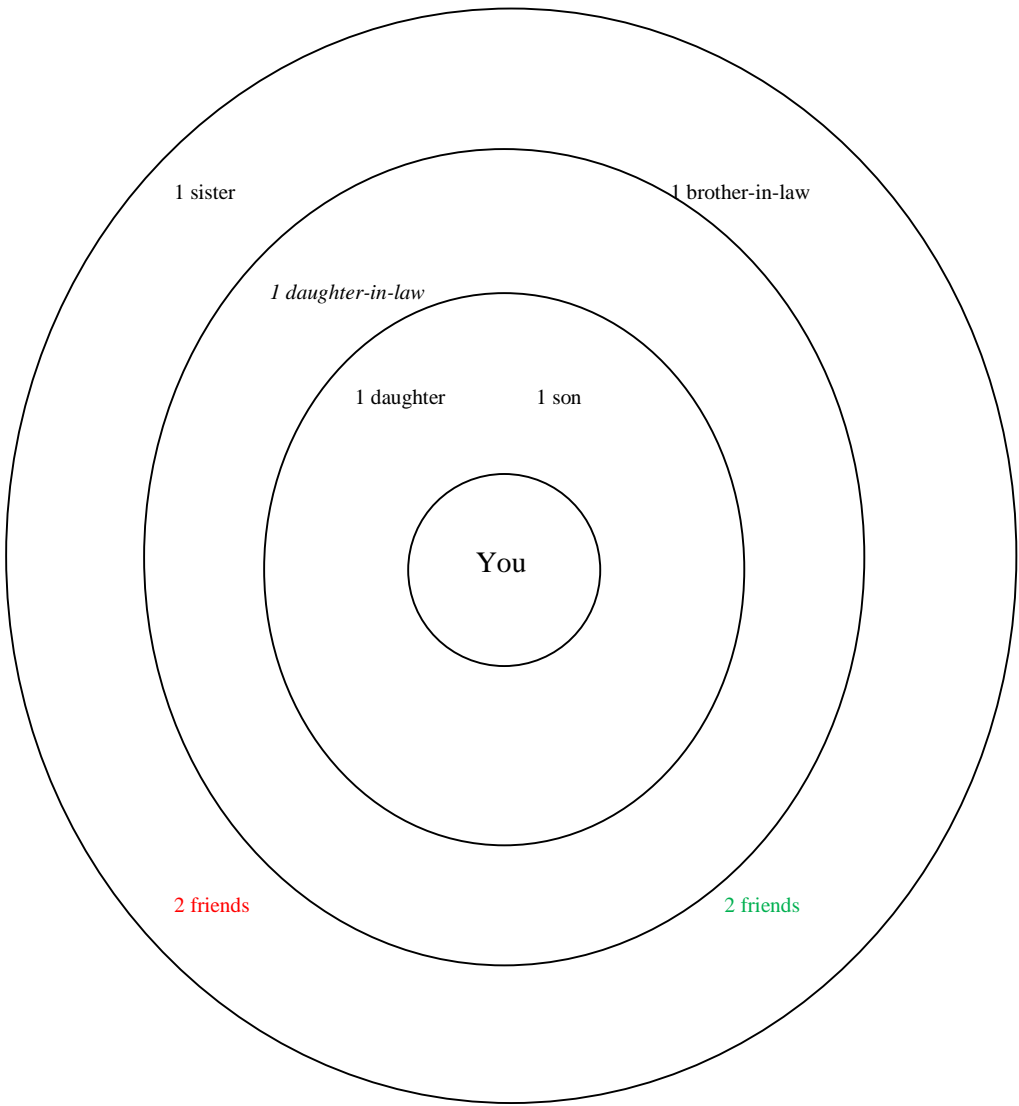


Figure 2 Mary's personal community diagram over the three stages

1st stage

2nd stage

3rd stage

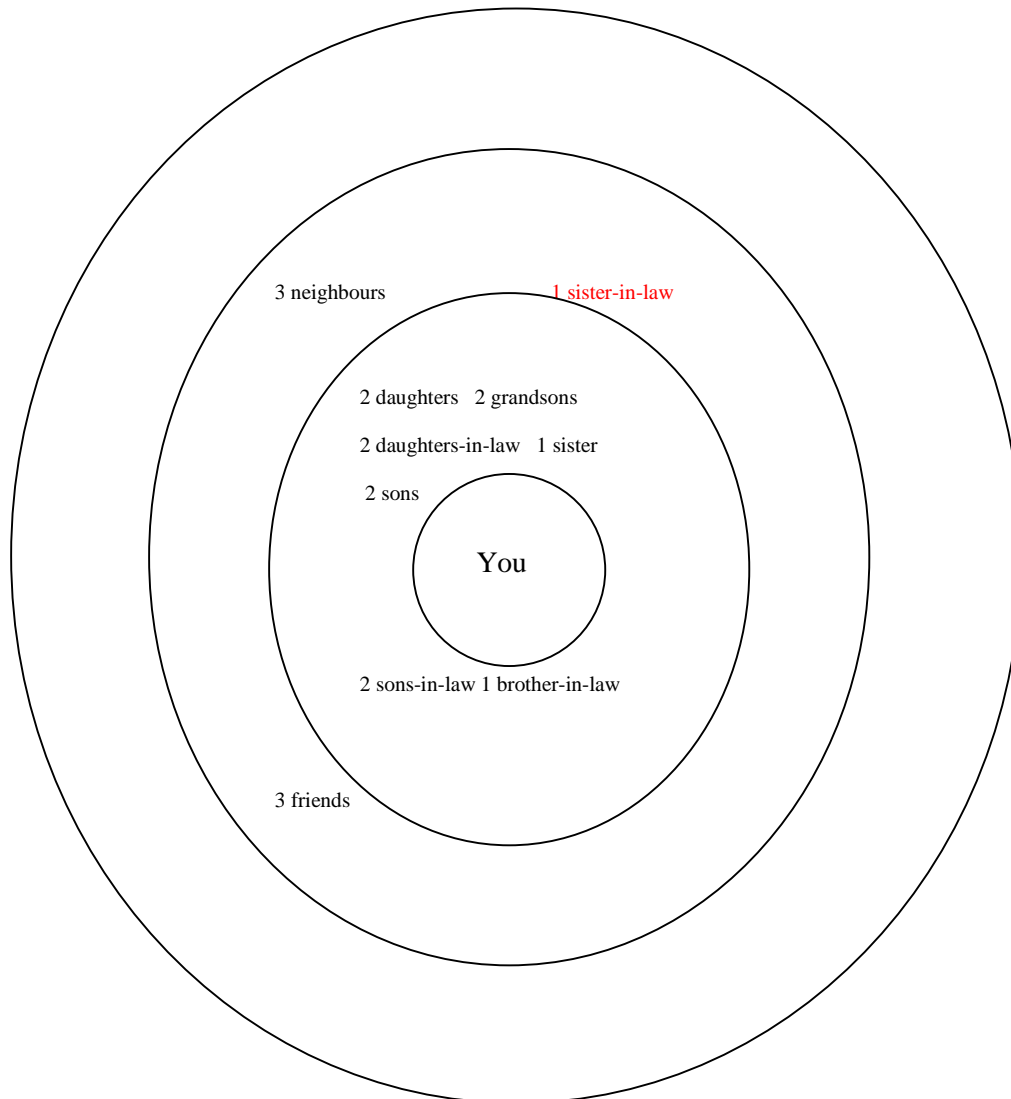


Table 1 Core Personal Community Types

First stage of interviews	Final stage of interviews
Family only	
Concentrated family	Concentrated family
Diluted family	Diluted family
Friend with family centrality	Friend with family centrality
Friend with mixed centrality	Friend with mixed centrality
Mixed with family centrality	